

CHICAGO – U.S. Reps. Mark Kirk, Judy Biggert, Dan Lipinski and Peter Roskam hosted an ad hoc congressional hearing highlighting the deteriorating condition of the Great Lakes. With national Great Lakes Day on Wednesday, March 7, the representatives heard testimony from federal, city and environmental experts regarding threats to the lakes' ecosystems and ongoing restoration efforts.

Panelists included representatives from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the U.S. Geological Survey's Great Lakes Science Center, the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative, the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago, the Alliance for the Great Lakes, the Shedd Aquarium and Jupiter Oxygen.

"The Sierra Legal Defense Fund reports that Detroit dumped over 13 billion gallons of raw sewage into the Great Lakes," said Congressman Kirk. "More than 40 million people rely on the Great Lakes for their drinking water. But shoreline cities like Detroit release over 24 billion gallons of sewage into the Great Lakes each year. We have to stop poisoning our water supply and that is why the federal government should ban sewage dumping in our lakes."

Closing a Lake Michigan beach due to pollution has an economic cost from \$7,935 to \$37,030 per day. According to the National Resources Defense Council, during the 92-day summer from June 1 to August 31 in 2005, there were 87 days of beach closings in the 10th Congressional District alone.

Invasive species also threaten the economic livelihood of the more than 75,000 people who work in the Great Lakes fishing industry. There are now more than 180 foreign aquatic species, from Asian carp to zebra mussels, that endanger natural habitats. This threat costs nearly \$5 billion each year.

The lakes are also at risk from mercury pollution. Mercury emitted from coal-burning power plants becomes a powerful neurotoxin in the Great Lakes food chain. At the hearing, executives from Jupiter Oxygen, an Illinois-based, energy-technology-company detailed the potential for new methods to limit mercury contamination from coal-fired power plants. The Great Lakes area accounts for 29 percent of the U.S. population, but produces 36 percent of the nation's mercury emissions from power plants.

“Technologies like the one developed by Jupiter Oxygen may have the ability to reduce mercury emitted from coal power plants,” said Congressman Kirk. “If this can be done in a cost-effective manner, it would help to protect the health of families in the Midwest.”

The Representatives also announced new Great Lakes restoration legislation in the U.S. House of Representatives. The Great Lakes Regional Collaboration Implementation Act of 2007 codifies many the recommendations of the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration, an organization of more than 1,500 governmental and non-governmental stakeholders interested in preserving and restoring the Great Lakes. The comprehensive legislation addresses invasive species, coastal health, wetlands and habitat protection, toxic substances, research, monitoring and oversight. Key provisions of the Act include:

- Creation of a comprehensive program to establish mandatory ballast water management to prevent and reduce the spread of invasive aquatic species.
 - A ban on the importation and interstate transfer of live Asian carp.
 - Reauthorization of a program for technical assistance for small treatment facilities and of the State Revolving Loan Fund for \$20 billion over five years to assist communities with upgrading and improving their wastewater infrastructure.
 - Authorization for \$50 million for NOAA to restore waterfront areas.
 - Reductions of polluted run-off entering our streams and rivers by protecting wetlands.
 - Establishment of the “Great Lakes Mercury Product Stewardship Strategy Grant Program” through which the EPA could award up to \$10 million per year for grants to Great Lakes states to implement projects to phase-down mercury in the Great Lakes basin.
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- An increase in Great Lakes Legacy program funding for contaminated sediment cleanup to \$150 million per year.

“The Great Lakes Regional Collaboration Act is one of the most important pieces of legislation for the protection of our water resources,” said Congressman Kirk. “I proudly join with Reps. Biggert, Lipinski and Roskam to ensure that our children inherit clean and safe Great Lakes.”